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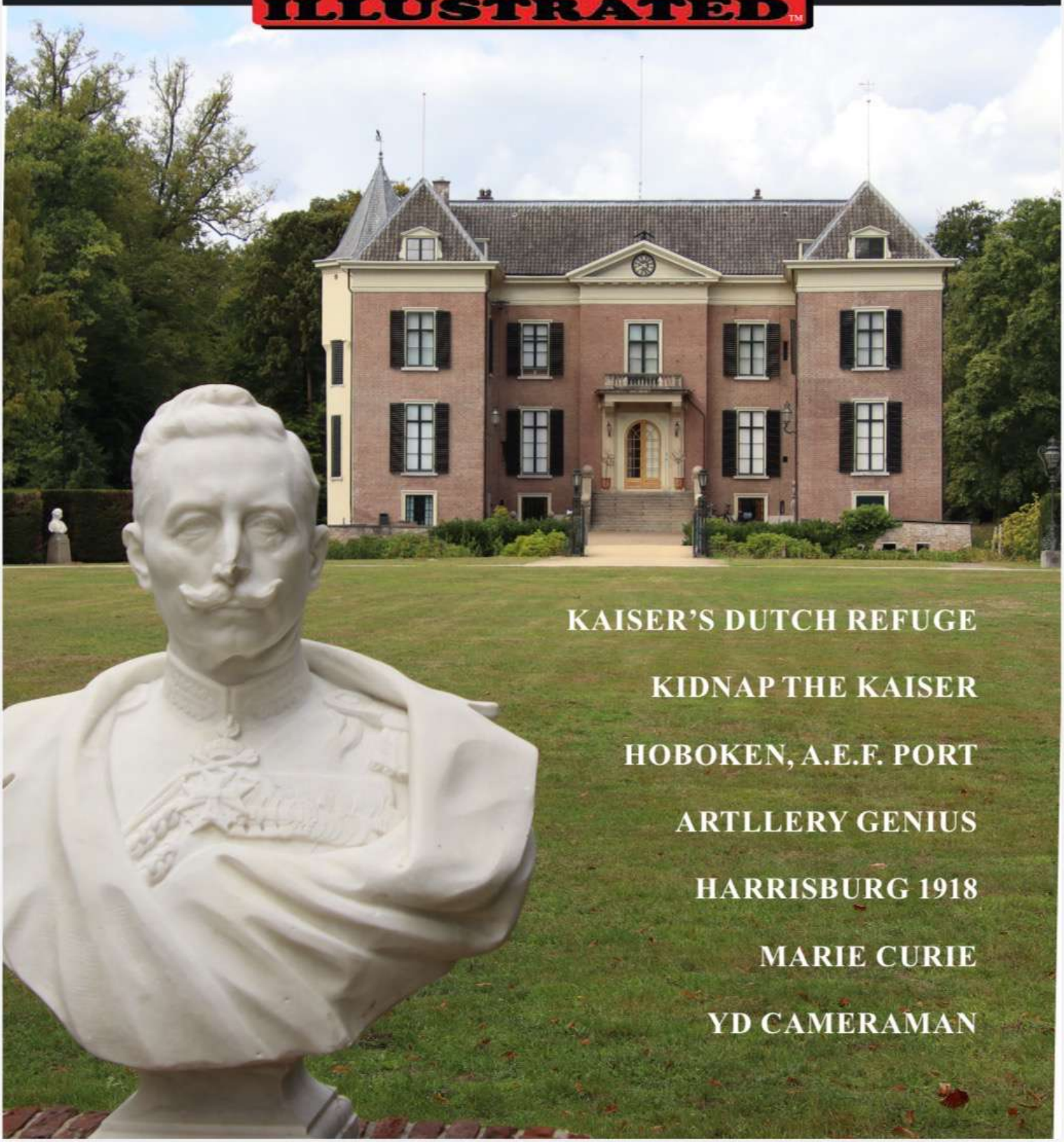

KAISER'S DUTCH REFUGE

KIDNAP THE KAISER

HOBOKEN, A.E.F. PORT

ARTLLERY GENIUS

HARRISBURG 1918

MARIE CURIE

YD CAMERAMAN

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FILMING THE FRONT WITH THE YANKEE DIVISION: LT. EDWIN H. COOPER AND THE BATTLE OF CHÂTEAU-THIERRY (1918)

RON VAN DOPPEREN

When Lieutenant Edwin Hyland Cooper set up his movie camera in the muddy trenches outside Château-Thierry in July 1918, he wasn't looking for glory. His mission was to document the first major American offensive of the Great War—a task that, as he soon discovered, was as dangerous as charging the enemy with a rifle. The whir of his Debrie motion-picture camera joined the staccato rattle of machine guns, and the man behind the lens found himself dodging bullets, rescuing the wounded, and even taking German prisoners—all while trying to keep his fragile reels of film intact. For his extraordinary bravery during that chaotic assault, Cooper was awarded both the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star. His greater achievement may have been what he left on film: some of the earliest moving images of Americans in battle, shot under fire during one of the defining moments of the U.S. Army's entry into the First World War.

A Cameraman Goes to War

Edwin Hyland Cooper was born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1881. From an early age he was drawn to photography—the new mechanical art that captured time itself. By the turn of the century, Cooper was working for the Lubin Film Company, one of America's pioneering studios,

Lt. Cooper, photographic officer 26th Division, filming near Château-Thierry, 19 July 1918. (Courtesy NARA)

and soon collaborated with noted photographer William Rau, producing a visual chronicle of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Before the guns of August thundered across Europe, Cooper had already traveled the world shooting travelogues in South America.

When the United States entered the Great War in 1917, Cooper traded the comforts of studio life for the chaos of the front. Enlisting in the U.S. Signal Corps, he became one of America's first official military cameramen. His orders were simple but daunting: record the activities of the American Expeditionary Forces (A.E.F.) in France. His tools were heavy, fragile, and utterly unsuited to the trenches—a bulky motion picture camera, glass-plate still cameras, tripods, and reels of volatile nitrate film. His uniform bore an officer's insignia, but his real weapon was the lens.

In October 1917, Cooper landed at St. Nazaire and quickly realized the scale of what he had volunteered for. "We were sent out in the field with absolutely no instructions and had to use our own judgment on what to photograph," he later recalled. "The men in charge did not know. To get information was the hardest thing."

The Signal Corps' photographic section was a new experiment. While Britain and France had already mobilized film crews to document their war efforts, the United States was starting from scratch. Many commanders saw little purpose in cameras at the front; some even feared that film might reveal military secrets. Cooper and his small team of cameramen—men like Sergeant Gideon Eikelberry, Private Painter, and Private Morse—had to improvise, navigating both military red tape and the deadly realities of modern warfare.

Cameramen Eikelberry and Painter, 26th Division, after a day's work in the trenches, April 1918. (Courtesy NARA)

"A Game of Hide and Seek"

By early 1918, Cooper was attached to the 26th "Yankee" Division, the YD, a formation of New England National Guard troops that would soon see heavy action. He followed the men into the trenches along the Chemin des Dames and near Toul, where he got his first taste of shellfire. "I remember the first time the American soldiers entered the trenches," he wrote. "I went into a sniper's post and got my first glimpse of no man's land. I wanted to make a picture of it and presently

Lt. Cooper changing film in a sniper's post, 1918. Location unknown but probably near Toul. (Courtesy NARA)

got up enough courage to put my camera up over the top."

The response was immediate: bullets whistled overhead, and furious officers demanded to know who was "taking pictures without permission." But Cooper persisted. He believed, as few did then, that film would become one of the most powerful records of the war. "Modern warfare did not take into consideration the photographer," he observed dryly. "From my experiences, war photography is a game of hide and seek. If you are lucky, you find it."

For Cooper and his men, luck was often the difference between a successful shot and a fatal one. The gleaming metal of a camera tripod could draw enemy fire; one of his assistants was nearly killed when sunlight flashed off the polished top of their precision tripod. "It did not take us long to find a box of paint and destroy its beauty," Cooper wrote.

As the spring of 1918 gave way to summer, the war's momentum shifted. The Germans had launched a massive offensive toward the Marne River, threatening Paris. To stop them, General John J. Pershing's American forces were rushed into the line alongside exhausted French troops. One of the fiercest engagements would unfold around the small town of Château-Thierry.

102nd Infantry, advancing towards Bouresches Wood. Shells were bursting beyond the hill above. Cameramen Eikelberry and Painter were wounded while marching at the end of this line. Torcy, 17 July 1918. (Courtesy *Pictorial History of the 26th Division* (1920))

America's Baptism of Fire

From the American perspective, Château-Thierry was a crucible. It marked the moment when U.S. forces, barely a year in Europe, proved they could fight—and win—against the battle-hardened German army. The 2nd and 3rd U.S. Divisions halted the German advance along the Marne in June 1918, and in July, the 26th Division joined the counteroffensive.

The fighting was brutal. Artillery pounded the ridgelines, machine guns swept the fields, and gas shells filled the air with a greenish haze. The Americans, many of whom had never seen combat before, went "over the top" into a landscape of smoke, mud, and splintered trees. It was this maelstrom that Edwin Cooper was sent to film.

"The latter part of June 1918 we were rushed to Château-Thierry," Cooper wrote. "On the afternoon of July 17, I was told to report to headquarters of the 103rd Infantry. There I was given the particulars regarding the proposed attack on Torcy. We started off with our cameras arriving at the battalion dugouts just after dusk."

German prisoners carrying photographic equipment from the battlefield near Château-Thierry. Picture taken by Private Painer, Photo Unit, 26th Division, 19 July 1918. (Courtesy NARA)

He and his cameramen didn't know the exact hour of the assault—known as "zero hour"—until late that night. "The time was to be 4:35," he wrote. "This was rather disappointing to the camera crowd, as I had understood the attacking

hour was to be eight o'clock, and I knew the light would be poor earlier in the morning."

That small detail—light—could mean the difference between success and failure. Early combat photographers had to rely entirely on natural illumination. Too much smoke, too little sun, and the day's work could be ruined. Still, Cooper prepared his camera and joined the advancing troops.

"Slipping and sliding, we wound our way in single file into the trenches that night," he remembered. "When we reached the first line we had to run for it, stopping at the top of the trench to make a few feet of film of the men going over. The light was very poor, but just as I got the camera placed the sun came up in the east and the picture showed a silhouette of the doughboys trudging over the top in the first big offensive."

Over the Top

Moments later, Cooper's world dissolved into chaos. His assistant, Private Morse, collapsed from exhaustion after carrying the heavy camera all night. Cooper took over the load himself. "The machine guns were rattling and we could hear the bullets whistling by," he noted. "The next minute a shell burst near and my helper dropped. A fragment of shell had taken a piece out of his stomach."

Cooper dragged the wounded man to safety, then returned for his camera—a decision that could easily have cost him his life. As he lifted the tripod, he suddenly spotted four German soldiers ahead of him, their machine gun aimed in his direction. "Why I pulled my gun, I never knew, except perhaps with the instinct of self-preservation," he wrote. "Instantly they threw up their hands, coming towards me yelling 'Kamerad!'"

Behind him, a grenade exploded. More Germans appeared, one bleeding profusely from a shattered hand. Within minutes, Cooper had taken them prisoner—and then set them to work carrying wounded Americans to safety. "The shells were falling all around," he wrote. "So I started them working on the wounded Americans and opened up a first aid station of my own in no man's land."

"Lt. Cooper and his seven Huns", Committee on Public Information publicity picture. (Courtesy *Bulletin of Photography* (September 1918))

It was a surreal tableau: an American cameraman commanding a group of captured Germans, gas shells hissing nearby, while trying to save lives and preserve his film. "We had to take a chance on an open field," he remembered. "We were lucky as the Germans changed from high explosives to gas shells and the wounded could not put on a mask. We kept on, the Boches carrying the wounded and the photographic equipment."

Two of his cameramen, Eikelberry and Painter, were not so lucky. Covering another part of the line, both were hit by machine-gun fire—Painter in the elbow, Eikleberry losing a finger. Yet even as they bled, they tried to finish their shots. "Eikelberry cursed his luck, wishing it had been the other hand," Cooper wrote. "Both of the men being injured on the starboard side."

For their courage, both men later received the Distinguished Service Cross, along with Cooper himself.

The film Cooper shot that day—fragments of soldiers advancing through the mist, smoke curling over shattered trees—was preserved by the U.S. National Archives and the Imperial War Museum. Though silent and grainy, the images capture something rare: the immediacy of combat as seen through the eyes of those who lived it. Cooper's report in fact is one of the best documented first-hand accounts of World War I battle cinematography. The reels found in the U.S. Signal Corps collection aligned perfectly with Cooper's

Scene from Signal Corps production *Flashes of Action,* showing the attack at Château-Thierry, filmed by Lt. Cooper.

written report, making it possible to reconstruct the sequence of events almost frame by frame.

The surviving footage offers more than history; it offers perspective. Unlike the staged battle scenes filmed behind the lines by war propagandists, Cooper's images came from the heart of the fighting. His camera lens trembled with each nearby explosion. The soldiers in his frames were not actors—they were men risking their lives for every inch of ground.

Above the Front

After Château-Thierry, Cooper's daring earned him a promotion to Captain and new responsibilities as photographic officer for the 5th U.S. Army Corps. His work expanded from trenches to the skies.

Lt. Cooper ready for flight. Aviation School, Issoudon, France, December 1917. (Courtesy NARA)

Aboard fragile biplanes, he became one of the first aerial cinematographers, filming dogfights and reconnaissance missions over the Western Front. "To get a proper focus," one trade journal reported in 1918, "he would climb out of his seat in an airplane, slide out to the tail of the machine, and there complete his work. His weight caused the tail to dip, and the pilot had to loop the loop several times to save their lives."

It was this reckless audacity that earned Cooper a place among the Gimper Club, an informal fraternity of stunt-flying daredevils in the 94th Aero Squadron—whose ranks included America's leading ace, Eddie Rickenbacker. The two became close friends, collaborating on a staged dogfight between Rickenbacker's SPAD and a captured German Hannover biplane. During filming, Cooper's aircraft crashed; miraculously, both he and his pilot survived unscathed, and even the camera was undamaged.

Rickenbacker later described how real the mock combat looked: French artillery units opened fire, thinking it was an actual enemy plane. Cooper's footage, some of which survives today, remains a remarkable record of early military aviation on film.

After the Guns Fell Silent

When the Armistice came in November 1918, Cooper stayed in Europe to organize and catalogue the mountain of footage collected by Signal Corps cameramen. Much of it would appear in *Pershing's Crusaders* (1918), the U.S. government's first official war film. Cooper estimated that "most of the footage" in that production came from his team's cameras.

Returning home, he continued to work as a photojournalist, correspondent, and lecturer. In the 1930s he traveled widely for the *Christian Science Monitor* and later filmed the Second World War in color for his documentary *With G.I. Joe Around the World.* He was in London during the Blitz and in Asia for the Burma campaign, once again placing himself where the action was fiercest.

Despite the changing technology and politics of his time, Cooper never lost the restless curiosity that had driven him to film the Great War. "War

Breakdown of the Signal Corps Photo Unit 26th Division auto, Lt. Cooper, and Pvts. Painter and Eikelberry pushing. (Courtesy NARA)

photography can surely be classed as hunting," he once said, "and you are lucky if you get it."

In 1948, while fishing on Silver Lake in Harrisville, New Hampshire, the man who had filmed so many dangers met a quiet end. His boat overturned, and he drowned at the age of sixty-seven. Cooper was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery—a fitting resting place for a man who had risked everything to document his comrades in arms.

Today, a century after Château-Thierry, Edwin H. Cooper's name is scarcely known outside circles of military film historians. Yet his story embodies a unique intersection of art, technology, and courage. He and his fellow cameramen turned fragile film stock into enduring testimony—proof of what the American Expeditionary Forces endured during their baptism of fire.

In Cooper's surviving footage, you can see soldiers moving cautiously through shell-pocked fields, smoke drifting from shattered villages, and the flicker of sunlight breaking through the haze. There are no speeches, no grand heroics—just the relentless, human rhythm of battle.

His words remain the best summary of what it meant to film under fire: *"Mr. Griffith with his wonderful war pictures, as it is not fought, has educated the public to such a degree that we felt we might at this juncture satisfy them, and we tried to get spectacular shots. But modern warfare did not take into consideration the photographer."*

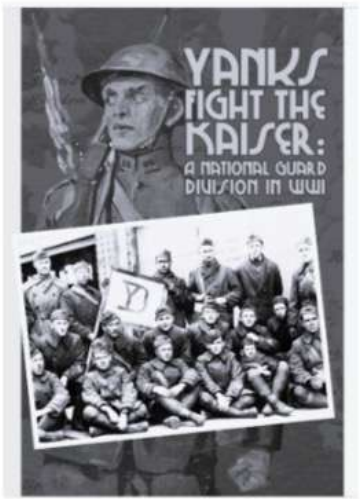
The irony is that Cooper's very limitations—the poor light, the danger, the chaos—made his images real in a way no staged production could match. Against all odds, he captured the American war as it truly was: uncertain, courageous, and raw. In the end, Edwin H. Cooper's story is not just about film or photography. It's about the will to bear witness—to show future generations what courage looked like when the world was on fire.

Watch *Filming the American Attack at Château-Thierry* (1918)

https://youtu.be/JoU5gLqfBUE?si=ePns893DVoDqupfH

About the author

Ron van Dopperen studied history at the University of Utrecht (Netherlands) where he wrote his Master of Arts Thesis on the American World War I films. He is co-author with Cooper C. Graham of *Shooting the Great War: Albert Dawson and the American Correspondent Film Company* (2013) and with Jim Castellan and Cooper Graham of *American Cinematographers in the Great War* (2014).



Yanks Fight the Kaiser, a documentary about the Yankee Division, 26th Division, produced for American Public Television by Ed & Libby Klekowski.

https://www.pbs.org/video/wgby-documentaries-yanks-fight-kaiser/

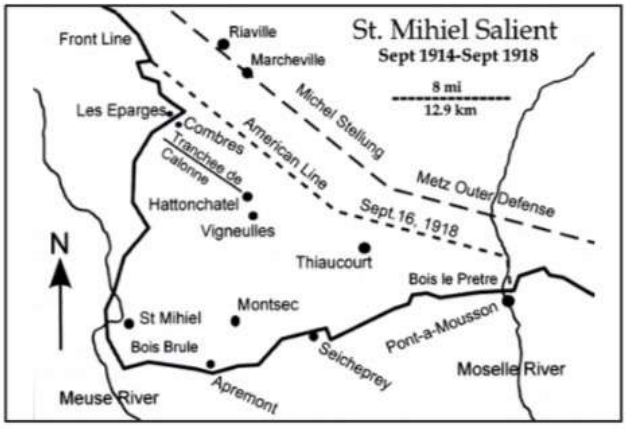
A FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPH

ED KLEKOWSKI

In 1920, Captain Edwin Cooper, with Albert E. George, published *Pictorial History of the Twenty-sixth Division,* which is essentially an album of the photographs shot by the Signal Corps 26th Division Photographic Unit. One photograph in this collection became the most famous First World War photograph in Massachusetts. It is of General Passaga, 32nd French Army Corps, decorating the regimental colors of the 104th Infantry Regiment (formerly the 8th and 2nd Massachusetts Volunteer Milita, units dating back to 1775) with the Croix de Guerre for bravery and conduct under fire, the first American regiment to be so decorated. The date on the photograph is April 23, 1918.

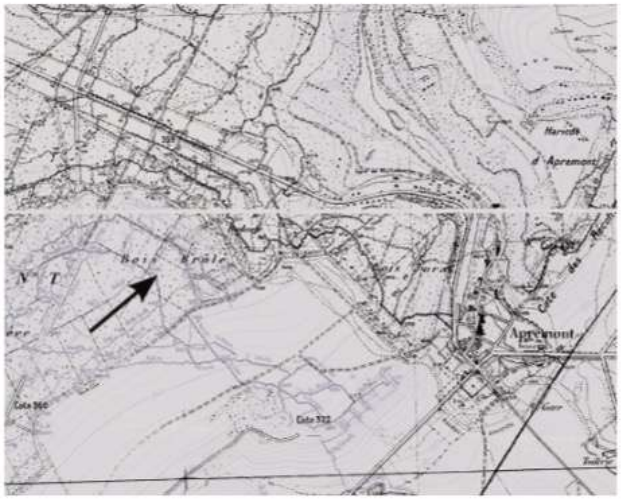
Background

The 26th Division, the Yankee Division, YD, was the first full division to arrive in France. By April 1918 it held the front line along the south side of the St. Mihiel Salient. The Germans had captured the Salient in late 1914. Their trenches were heavily fortified and were the scene of numerous and bloody battles as the French attempted to pinch off the Salient. On April 10th, 12th, and 13th, the 104th Infantry held the lines in Bois Brûlé near the village of Apremont-la-Forêt. The Germans attacked, capturing front line trenches, and the American 104th Infantry Regiment counterattacked driving out the attackers. This action was the basis for the regiment's decoration on April 23, 1918.



Today

Exploring Bois Brûlé battlefield (burnt wood) today, it is easy to discover relics from the war. The German front is a maze of deep trenches, rusty barbed wire and concrete fortifications and unexploded shells—so beware.



Apremont trench map, arrow indicates Bois Brûlé and the French trenches held by the 104th. The heavily fortified German trenches are to the north. (Courtesy NARA)

German first line trench.

Barbed wire entanglement.

Remains of a German concrete abri.

Entrance to an underground shelter, German.

A German concrete trench, note the fire step.

Post-War Memorialization

In Massachusetts numerous towns and cities commemorated Apremont: Holyoke has Apremont Highway, Westfield has Apremont Way, there is an Apremont Street in many towns, Springfield has the Apremont Triangle District, and Westfield's Apremont Park has a copy of Cooper's photograph in bronze.

Monument in Apremont Park, Westfield, Massachusetts. Dedicated in 1937.

A fountain in Apremont-la-Forêt given by the citizens of Holyoke commemorating the city's soldiers who were killed in action nearby. Erected in 1922.

In the 1920s the citizens of Holyoke raised 300,000 francs, ca. $38,000, to rebuild Apremont-la-Forêt. Among the constructions were a water system and a memorial fountain.

A water hydrant, one of many, donated to Apremont-la-Forêt. by the citizens of Holyoke, Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts State House in Boston displays a wall mural painted in 1927 by Richard Andrew based upon Cooper's photograph.